

## Yanique Norman



*The Soggy Moons 1* (2011),  
graphite, collage and  
gouache on paper, 20" x30"

# Dislogging the Visual: Yanique Norman's Amorphous Beings

by Kristin Juarez and  
Christina Price Washington

Yanique Norman's body of work demands active viewing of the anthropomorphic, disembodied, bulbous beings that emerge from her drawings and paintings. Coupled with the exploration, contemplation, and deciphering of the shapes and forms, her titles both ground and complicate the images, dislodging any signs of familiarity made available to viewers. The resulting pleasure comes from untangling how history is fragmented in her work, which is only awarded to prolonged viewing, and does not give way easily to delight or accomplishment. Referring to mental and somatic recourses, her work mobilizes an affective response that causes stimuli mediating between body and intellect. Our ability to finally crack the codes depends on recognizing how images have maintained their cultural meaning, despite their initial disguise in her work.

The body is the central point of Norman's work, but her expression of the body is seen as an amorphous substance or membrane, as Norman manipulates found photographs of black men and women (often anonymous, but always objectified) that have persisted in our collective cultural memory. Working in the manner of collage, her work stands out from the kinds of collage that are often anchored in popular and glossy print media. Norman gives them unique and altering effects by reproducing them by hand and adding color to them.

At first, the re-purposing and re-positioning of these images remind us that photography's history is intrinsically linked to the edification, inscription, and sealant of race onto skin. As Coco Fusco examined

extensively in her 2003 exhibition *Only Skin Deep*,<sup>1</sup> photography's indexical ability fixed with the capacity to capture physical difference historically served as evidence for the invisible elements of race. In some ways, the multitude of these images has made them invisible, but Norman's ability to manipulate these images gives them new life as cultural images and new life within fine art. Photo practices have been intrinsic to the racialization and the subsequent de-humanization of the black body, while their plenitude in contemporary culture and historical distance have re-contextualized, shifted, and irreparably changed how these images function.

Norman's interest goes beyond the formal similarity of their origin; rather, her work attempts to visualize what the artist calls "the psychological body," which has, and arguably continues to, remained out of view, invisible, and denied. Specifically, Norman creates work that speaks to the psychological position of the female raced body. The black female body is a springboard for fantastical aesthetic play that art filmmakers Maya Deren and John Akomfrah both describe as a constant state of becoming in which identity is regularly gaining wisdom and experience. In her work, the body is simultaneously depicted as abject and beautiful, authorizing a contagious enjoyment of looking.

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Rendering her subjects as soft and grotesque bodies, they are carefully composed; in addition to collage, the use of graphite and gouache on paper facilitate material and interpretative layering. Predominantly fashioned in graphite colors, her images range from iron black to steel gray, and when used as a wash, the graphite appears a deep blue that seems to transmit light as giving her subjects a liquid quality.

Areas of pooled graphite and gouache read as skin that is lightweight and translucent and are juxtaposed with disproportional body parts signifying a personal investment in the weight of epidermalization and colonial history.

For example, *Fatherlessness 1* (2010) depicts a small person walking towards the left side of the page looking at the viewer. The face is collaged onto the body and arms, the neck, and one foot are shackled to a huge balloon-like substance that resembles an oversized, distended parade float. The balloon is big, round, and blue, like marble. It is an extension of the body, grotesquely enlarged to correspond to a woman's chest with two protruding shapes. Although it appears light and happy, ostensibly depicting a person and balloons, the complexity of the image is recognized after a moment of delay. The result is an image that is already familiar to the viewer. It is not only a raced body that is shackled, but also a disfigured female body. Norman carefully formulated a double construction of race and gender that calls on the viewer to investigate while conjuring both pleasure and horror.

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*The Soggy Moons 1* shows two anthropomorphic creatures crawling along a curvy landscape. Again, there is a delay of recognition as the landscape emerges as a female torso lying on her side. The two creatures crawling from left to right are dark, hunched over, and each carry a load on their backs that almost consumes the carrier. Their shape is an organic, bulging, and amorphous substance and the viewer has to contemplate where one body ends and the other begins. The protruding shapes resemble the curves of the female body that reveal globular light-detecting



*Fatherlessness 1* (2010), graphite, collage and gouache on paper, 20" x 30"

organs and limbs almost like hermit crabs carrying their mollusk shell. Drawn in graphite and gouache, the torso representing the landscape is dark and textured and stands in contrast to the bulging amorphous shapes that have a plump, filled-out quality, like skin stretched to capacity. The little figures carrying their weight are drawn, but seem to be created as if liquid graphite drips shaped them. The figures emerge distorted, and the realization that these bodies are barely intact means the viewer's visual pleasure oscillates between what is beautiful and grotesque in the image.

**Within her work, the experience and expression of black bodies are catalyzed in converging and misaligned forms that make visible how blackness exists within the lacuna of the body and the psyche.**

It becomes possible to read how the excessiveness of material bodies are symptoms of a larger social condition, within which there has been enormous pressure for skin to signify and project desires and fears, power and powerlessness, beauty and the abject. Yanique Norman's work pushes the boundaries of these depicted bodies visualizing the persistent inadequacy of the epidermal surface, offering its possibility to re-imagine temporal and physical dimensions on a spatial plane. Within her work, the experience and expression of black bodies are catalyzed in converging and misaligned forms that make visible how blackness exists within the lacuna of the body and the psyche.

In preparation for the *liquid blackness* symposium, Christina Price Washington and Kristin Juarez conducted a studio visit with Yanique Norman to view and discuss the formal and conceptual drives behind her work. This essay comes out of our conversation with her.

<sup>1</sup> Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis, eds. *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self* (International Center of Photography/Harry N. Abrams, 2003).



*Fatherlessness 3*  
(2011), graphite  
and gouache on  
paper, 20" x30"

# Nikita Gale

*Look At All Of This Fun I Had Without You!* (2014),  
acrylic, bubble wrap,  
solitude, 4" x 6"

